



# THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF CONSTANT SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON TEENAGERS' MENTAL HEALTH AND BODY IMAGE

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This research paper examines the negative effects of social media on teenagers' mental health. The research question focuses on how social media affects teenagers' mental health, with the thesis statement highlighting the negative impacts of social media use on teenagers' body image and mental health. The methodology included extensive secondary research to assimilate various results of research papers on the negative effects of social media on teenagers' mental health. The paper explores the adverse effects of social media, such as body dysmorphia, extreme dieting, and social media addiction, which can lead to serious physical and mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders.

**KEYWORDS:** Teenagers, Social Media, Mental Health, Body Dysmorphia, Addiction

## INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, social media has become an integral part of people's lives, serving various purposes ranging from staying connected with loved ones to conducting business operations. Teenagers, in particular, dedicate extensive amounts of time to social media platforms. According to a survey published by Common Sense Media, teenagers spend an average of an hour and a half per day on social media platforms (Robb et al., 2022). Social media refers to websites and applications that allow users to create, share, and interact with content, and they can have detrimental effects on teens. Some common social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Today, social media plays a significant role in the lives of teenagers, often having negative impacts on their self-esteem and sense of self (Quinn, 2023). Social media is also a trigger, especially in young people, for body dysmorphia by creating unrealistic expectations (Quinn, 2023). According to a 2021 report by the Pew Research Center, 26% of teens say social media sites make them feel worse about their own lives. This research paper aims to explore the adverse effects of excessive social media usage on teenagers' mental health.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The negative effects of social media on teenagers' mental health have been a topic of concern for researchers in recent years. The research paper focuses on the adverse effects of excessive social media usage on teenagers' mental health, specifically on body dysmorphia, extreme dieting, and social media addiction.

The study utilizes secondary research to assimilate various results of research papers on the negative effects of social media on teenagers' mental health. The research highlights the importance of understanding the impact of social media on teenagers and the need for parents, educators, and mental health professionals to be vigilant and proactive in addressing these issues. The paper includes references to multiple studies to support its findings.

The Girls' Attitude Survey conducted in 2021 revealed that 73% of girls aged 11–16 and 91% of girls aged 17–21 disclosed experiencing harmful content while online in the last year. These harms include misinformation and hate speech, appearance

pressures, harassment, and bullying. The survey also found that 94% of teenage girls have reported being body shamed. Another survey conducted in 2016 by the same organization found that 57% of 12- to 20-year-olds thought that their appearance was the cause of their bullying.

The paper also draws on research by the Pew Research Center (2021), which found that 26% of teens say social media sites make them feel worse about their own lives. According to a 2021 study by the same organization, 77% of teenagers use social media platforms. Another study by the Pew Research Center found that 46% of teenagers who use the internet have experienced some form of cyberbullying.

## Negative Body Image

Research has shown that social media use can contribute to a negative body image (Mahon & Hevey, 2021). Teenagers, in particular, are vulnerable to developing body dysmorphia because of the unrealistic standards presented on social media platforms and cyberbullying in the form of body shaming. A recent study showed that adolescents, particularly girls, specifically said that they believed social media had a largely negative impact on their body image. When these appearance-related goals were not reached, girls attempted to achieve female body expectations, whereas boys generally accepted functionality ideals; appearance comparisons tended to cause body dissatisfaction when these appearance-related goals were not met (Mahon & Hevey, 2021). This phenomenon may contribute to the adoption of unhealthy habits such as extreme dieting, overexertion through exercise, and cosmetic surgery. Although some defenders of social media argue that it fosters a sense of belonging within peer groups, empirical data suggests that excessive usage of social media may jeopardize genuine interpersonal experiences and adversely influence the development of social cues essential for functioning as a well-adjusted adult later in life.

## Body Dysmorphia

Body dysmorphia is a mental disorder that affects many teenagers, especially those who are exposed to the unrealistic beauty standards presented on social media platforms (Quinn, 2023). Body dysmorphia causes individuals to have a distorted

perception of their physical appearance, leading them to obsess over minor or imagined flaws. In some cases, this perception is so severe that it can lead to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts. Teens with body dysmorphia may describe themselves as unattractive, deformed, or ugly; they may even see themselves as monsters. Often, a person's concerns are focused around the face, but they can involve any part of the body or multiple body parts. People with BDD often compare themselves to others and see themselves as inadequate and highly flawed (Quinn, 2023).

Cyberbullying on social media platforms is another trigger for BDD in teenagers. Being constantly bombarded with negative or hurtful comments about their appearance can cause teenagers to become obsessed with their perceived flaws and develop a distorted body image. Cyberbullying can have long-lasting effects on a teenager's self-esteem.

According to a 2021 Girls' Attitudes Survey, 73% of girls aged 11–16 and 91% of girls aged 17–21 disclosed that they had experienced some form of harmful content while online in the last year. These harms include misinformation and hate speech, appearance pressures, harassment, and bullying. Unfortunately for most, body shaming has become part of their daily routine and day-to-day experience. 94% of teenage girls have reported being body shamed, and 57% of 12–20-year-olds think that the cause of their bullying was due to their appearance, according to the 2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey.

A 2022 study by the Pew Research Center found that 46% of teenagers who use the internet have experienced some form of cyberbullying. Social media platforms are relatively open, so a large number of people can see messages quickly. Social media sites also allow people to anonymously communicate their opinions and sentiments, making it easier to be cruel or harsh to each other. One common form of cyberbullying is known as body shaming, or making critical comments about the shape or size of someone else's body. This type of cyberbullying can take place on all forms of social media. While it is completely normal and even common for individuals to experience some form of self-doubt or shame once in a while, body shaming can make these feelings constant and overwhelming.

### Adverse Effects of Extreme Dieting

Teenagers engage in a common behavior: extreme dieting, as a result of body dissatisfaction caused by social media. Crash diets are intensive eating regimes. They often demand that you eliminate certain items, and sometimes entire food groups, from your diet. As a result, these diets are tough to follow and even more challenging to maintain. Crash diets can make it difficult for your body to receive the nutrition it requires to function correctly (Vergnaud, 2022). While it may seem like an effective way to lose weight, extreme dieting can have serious adverse effects on both physical and mental health.

Physically, extreme dieting can lead to disordered eating and malnutrition, which can cause fatigue, weakness, hair loss, and a weakened immune system. Losing too much weight too fast can delay puberty or stop your period, even once it has started. This can affect the way your hormones work and make it difficult to become pregnant later in life (Vergnaud, 2022). Additionally, extreme dieting can lead to dehydration, which can cause headaches, dizziness, and even fainting.

Mentally, extreme dieting can lead to an increased risk of developing an eating disorder, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia. These disorders can cause long-term damage to the

body, including heart problems, digestive issues, and even death (Margot Rittenhouse, MS, LPC, NCC, 2021). Furthermore, extreme dieting can lead to depression, anxiety, and attempts at weight control, which can negatively impact a teenager's overall quality of life and can lead to binge eating in adulthood.

### Addiction to Social Media

Social media addiction among teenagers is becoming increasingly common, and it poses a significant threat to their mental health. According to a 2021 study by the Pew Research Center, 77% of teenagers use social media platforms. Social media platforms are designed to be addictive, with features such as notifications and likes that trigger the release of dopamine, a chemical in the brain that creates feelings of pleasure and reward. Teenagers are especially vulnerable to social media addiction because they are still developing their self-identity and crave social acceptance and validation from their peers (Abrams, 2022).

Social media addiction can lead to many adverse outcomes, including reduced academic performance, sleep disturbances, and decreased physical activity. It can also lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Additionally, teenagers who are addicted to social media may struggle with maintaining healthy relationships with their peers and may have difficulty communicating effectively in real-life situations (Zayed, 2023).

One of the main reasons social media addictions are so prevalent among teenagers is the Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO). Research published in *Computers in Human Behavior* refers to FOMO as “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent.” (Przybylski et al., 2013). Social media platforms are designed to create a sense of FOMO by showcasing the activities of others and encouraging users to share their experiences. Teenagers who are addicted to social media often feel compelled to check their accounts constantly to avoid missing out on any updates or developments.

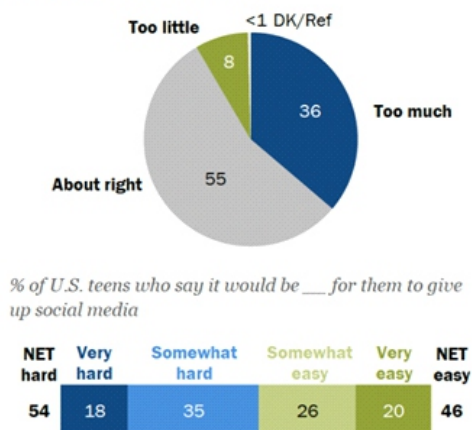
Social media addiction can also lead to a phenomenon known as social comparison. Social comparison is the tendency to compare oneself to others, often resulting in negative feelings about oneself. Teenagers addicted to social media may spend hours scrolling through their feeds, comparing their lives to those of their peers. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and even depression.

Another factor contributing to social media addiction among teenagers is the ease of access. Social media platforms are available 24/7, and teenagers can access them on their smartphones, tablets, and computers. This constant access can make it challenging for teenagers to disconnect from social media, which can lead to a decreased ability to focus on other activities.

Social media addiction is a serious issue that requires attention from parents, educators, and mental health professionals. Parents can help by setting limits on their teenager's social media use and encouraging them to engage in other activities, such as sports or hobbies. Educators can also play a role by teaching teenagers about the dangers of social media addiction and encouraging them to be mindful of their social media use. Mental health professionals can provide support to teenagers who are struggling with social media addiction and help them develop healthy coping mechanisms.

### 54% of teens say it would be hard to give up social media

% of U.S. teens who say that overall, the amount of time they spend on social media is ...



**Figure a: % of time spent on social media platforms by teenagers (Pie Chart)**

**Figure b: Level of difficulty in giving up social media by teenagers (Bar)**

Source: Pew Research Center (2021)

## CONCLUSION

This research paper has explored the adverse effects of social media on teenagers' mental health. Research has shown that social media use can contribute to body dysmorphia, extreme dieting, and social media addiction. These detrimental effects can lead to physical and mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. The research also highlights the importance of understanding the impact of social media on teenagers and the need for parents, educators, and mental health professionals to be vigilant and proactive in addressing these issues.

The findings of this research paper suggest that there is a need for more education and awareness around the negative effects of social media on teenagers' mental health. Parents, educators, and mental health professionals can play a critical role in educating teenagers about the dangers of excessive social media use and helping them develop healthy coping mechanisms. More research is also needed to better understand the long-term effects of social media use on teenagers' mental health.

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